Film, Video, and American History
FILM S247/ HIST S187/ AMST S483
Mondays and Wednesdays, 1-4:15pm

Instructor: Carolyn Jacobs
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Office Hours will be held by appointment on Zoom

Since its inception, cinema has represented, recorded, reimagined, and changed history. Films and videos can be seen as historical documents that allow us to understand the cultural values, beliefs, and anxieties of the moment they were made. They also actively take part in the production of history by engaging consciously with current and past events. This course examines American history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries through the lens of motion pictures.

In this seminar course, students will learn to closely analyze films and videos in relation to the historical moments in which they were made, paying attention to the relationship between a text’s narrative and style and the cultural context from which it emerged. Through film screenings, scholarly texts, group discussion, and engagement with primary sources, students will gain a deeper understanding of both film analysis and American history. Time periods discussed with include the Progressive Era, the Great Depression, World War II, the Civil Rights era, the Vietnam War, and 9/11.

Course Format:

Yale Summer Session courses will be held remotely this summer. Online learning poses certain challenges but also offers opportunities for new forms of engagement and learning, which we will take full advantage of in this class. Here’s how our class will be structured, in general:

1:00-1:30 pm: Log into Zoom. We’ll begin with student presentations on the week’s topic.

1:30-1:45pm: Break

2:00-3:15: Group discussion

3:15-3:30pm: Break

3:30- 4:15: Lecture on next week’s topic and film

Policies:

Attendance: Because this course is an accelerated seminar, it is very important that you attend each group Zoom discussion. Please contact me in advance if you will not be able to sign into our class for any reason. Unexcused absences will result in a lower grade.
**Screenings:** Two weekly screenings are required for this class. Videos will be available in the “Media Library” in Canvas and can be viewed at your convenience (before the next class meeting).

**Participation:** The success of this seminar depends on your engaged and generous participation during each session. Please come to class prepared (having seen the week’s film and done the assigned reading) and ready to contribute to the conversation. We will talk about how to best participate on Zoom during the first class.

**Academic Integrity:** Yale has a strict code of academic honesty. Violations of this code will have serious consequences. Please read over the following policies and adhere to them when completing assignments for this class: [http://catalog.yale.edu/undergraduate-regulations/policies/definitions-plagiarism-cheating/](http://catalog.yale.edu/undergraduate-regulations/policies/definitions-plagiarism-cheating/)

We will be relying upon a variety of primary and secondary sources in our assignments. Using reputable sources and citing them appropriately will be key to succeeding in this course. If you have any questions about what constitutes a reputable source, or how to properly cite sources, please see this guide ([https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing-using-sources](https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing-using-sources)) or speak to me.

**Readings:**

All readings for the course will be made available online, as either e-books through Yale’s library (log in using VPN) or PDFs on Canvas. The main texts that we will use are:


*Movies and American Society, 2nd Edition*, ed. Steven J. Ross (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) (PDFs of assigned chapters will be available on Canvas. You may also purchase this text through Yale’s bookstore online or other online retailers).

**Assignments:**

All assignments should be submitted on Canvas by the time specified on the syllabus. Late assignments will result in a lower grade.

1. **Weekly Screening Responses:** Students will be required to submit a very short response (3-5 sentences) to each film screened in class, which will help guide our group discussion during the next session. Your response can address any aspect of the film you find important, compelling, confusing, problematic, interesting, etc. You may pose questions about the film or connect the film to the week’s readings or previous topics addressed in class (though this is not required). Responses should be submitted on Canvas by midnight the evening before the next class session.
2. **Presentation (8-10 mins):** Each student is expected to give one brief (8-10 minute) presentation over the course of the semester on a topic related to the era and/or film we are discussing. For instance, you may focus on one specific aspect of the film (the director, screenwriter, genre, stars, advertising, reception), a different film made during the same era, a major cultural event of the time period, or anything else that you find interesting and relevant. You may present live or show a pre-recorded presentation. *Dates for presentations will be assigned during the first session.*

3. **Reception Assignment (3-4 pages, double-spaced):** You will submit a short report on one of the films screened in class, focusing on its reception by audiences and/or critics at the time it was made. You will rely upon several (at least three) primary sources (newspapers, magazines, posters, trade journals, etc.) published at the time the film was first released. You may also use secondary sources, though doing so is not required. We will go over resources and databases available online through Yale’s library early in the semester. *Due Wednesday 7/15 by midnight.*

4. **Final Paper (8-10 pages, double-spaced):** The final assignment for this class will ask you to look closely at a topic discussed in class, using one of the films we have screened (or two films, including at least one screened in class). A list of general prompts will be distributed early in the semester, but you are encouraged to choose a topic that interests you. *Due Wednesday 7/29 by midnight.*

**Grading:**

- Participation and Attendance: 10%
- Screening Responses: 15%
- Presentation: 15%
- Reception Assignment: 25%
- Final Paper: 35%
Schedule

*Screenings go with the topic of the following session.

**Week 1**
Monday, June 29th
**Introduction and Early American Cinema**


Wednesday, July 1st
**The Progressive Era: Film as a Social Force**

Screening: *The Big Parade* (Vidor, 1925)

**Week 2**
Monday, July 6th
**After WWI: Fantasies of Prosperity and Mobility**
Reading: Ross, Chapter 3; Mintz Chapters 2&3

*There will be a brief presentation on using Yale’s libraries, databases, and other resources to find primary sources after discussion today. Please plan to remain on Zoom for an extra 30 minutes today (we will take a break beforehand).


Wednesday, July 8th
**The Great Depression: Realism and Escapism at the Movies**
Reading: Mintz, Chapter 5 & 6; Donna Kornhaber, “Dangerous Voices: Modern Times and the Great Dictator.”
Screening: *Foreign Correspondent* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940)

**Week 3**  
**Monday, July 13th**  
**World War II: Hollywood and the “Prelude to War”**  
Readings: Mintz, Chapters 10, 11 & 12.  
Clips: *Why We Fight: Prelude to War* (Capra, 1942), *The Great Dictator* (Chaplin, 1940), *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), *Mrs. Miniver* (Wyler, 1942), *To Be or Not to Be* (Lubitsch, 1942), *They Were Expendable* (Ford, 1945), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Wyler, 1946)


*Midterm paper due on July 15th*

**Wednesday, July 15th**  
**Postwar Anxiety and Optimism**  
*Reception Assignment due at the beginning of class today*  
Readings: Ross, Chapter 8; Mintz, Chapter 15  


**Week 4**  
**Monday, July 20th**  
**Fear of Change: The Cold War and Civil Rights**  

Screening: *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1974)

**Wednesday, July 22nd**  
**Vietnam and Counterculture Movements**  
Reading: Mintz, Chapter 21 & 22

Screening: *The Hurt Locker* (Katherine Bigelow, 2008)

**Week 5**  
**Monday, July 27th**  
**Nostalgia, Fear, and Aggression from the Reagan Era to Today**  

Screening: *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014)

**Wednesday, July 29th**  
**Contemporary Hollywood and the Remaking of History**  
Readings: Mintz, Chapter 32; Melvyn Stokes, “Remembering the 60s: *Mississippi Burning* and *JFK,*” in *American History Through Hollywood Film* (On Canvas)  

*Final Paper due on July 29th*